

it to her with my compliments, and say that I found it on the bridge of Sant' Angelo. I can remember the very date. It was a quarter of an hour before I was run over by Prince Montevarchi's carriage. It was therefore on the 23d of September. As for the rest, do me the favour to tell me where my friends can find yours in an hour."

"At my house. But allow me to add that I do not believe a word of what you say."

"Is it a Roman custom to insult a man who has agreed to fight with you?" inquired Gouache. "We are more polite in France. We salute our adversaries before beginning the combat."

Therewith the Zouave saluted Giovanni courteously and turned on his heel, leaving the latter in an even worse humour than he had found him. Gouache was too much surprised at the interview to reason connectedly about the causes which had led to it, and accepted the duel with Sant' Ilario blindly, because he could not avoid it, and because whatever offence he himself had unwittingly given he had in turn been insulted by Giovanni in a way which left him no alternative but that of a resort to arms. His adversary had admitted, had indeed boasted, of having entered Gouache's rooms, and of having taken thence the letter and the pin. This alone constituted an injury for which reparation was necessary, but not content with this, Sant' Ilario had given him the lie direct. Matters were so confused that it was hard to tell which was the injured party; but since the prince had undoubtedly furnished a pretext more than sufficient, the soldier had seized the opportunity of proposing to send his friends to demand satisfaction. It was clear, however, that the duel could not take place at once, since Gouache was under arms, and it was imperatively necessary that he should have permission to risk his life in a private quarrel at such a time. It was also certain that his superiors would not allow anything of the kind at present, and Gouache for his part was glad of the fact. He preferred to be killed before the enemy rather than in a duel for which there was no adequate explanation, except that a man who had been outrageously deceived by a person or persons unknown had chosen to attack him for a thing he had never done. He had not the slightest inten-

tion of avoiding the encounter, but he preferred to see some active service in a cause to which he was devoted before being run through the body by one who was his enemy only by mistake. Giovanni's reputation as a swordsman made it probable that the issue would be unfavourable to Gouache, and the latter, with the simple fearlessness that belonged to his character, meant if possible to have a chance of distinguishing himself before being killed.

Half an hour later, a couple of officers of Zouaves called upon Sant' Ilario, and found his representatives waiting for them. Giovanni had had the good fortune to find Count Spicca at home. That melancholy gentleman had been his second in an affair with Ugo del Ferice nearly three years earlier and had subsequently killed one of the latter's seconds in consequence of his dishonourable behaviour in the field. He had been absent in consequence until a few weeks before the present time, when matters had been arranged, and he had found himself free to return unmolested. It had been remarked at the club that something would happen before he had been in Rome many days. He was a very tall and cadaverous man, exceedingly prone to take offence, and exceedingly skilful in exacting the precise amount of blood which he considered a fair return for an injury. He had never been known to kill a man by accident, but had rarely failed to take his adversary's life when he had determined to do so. Spicca had brought another friend, whom it is unnecessary to describe. The interview was short and conclusive.

The two officers had instructions to demand a serious duel, and Spicca and his companion had been told to make the conditions even more dangerous if they could do so. On the other hand, the officers explained that as Rome was in a state of siege, and Garibaldi almost at the gates, the encounter could not take place until the crisis was past. They undertook to appear for Gouache in case he chanced to be shot in an engagement. Spicca, who did not know the real cause of the duel, and was indeed somewhat surprised to learn that Giovanni had quarrelled with a Zouave, made no attempt to force an immediate meeting, but begged leave to retire and con-

sult with his principal, an informality which was of course agreed to by the other side. In five minutes he returned, stating that he accepted the provisions proposed, and that he should expect twenty-four hours' notice when Gouache should be ready. The four gentlemen drew up the necessary "protocol," and parted on friendly terms after a few minutes' conversation, in which various proposals were made in regard to the ground.

Spicca alone remained behind, and he immediately went to Giovanni, carrying a copy of the protocol, on which the ink was still wet.

"Here it is," he said sadly, as he entered the room, holding up the paper in his hand. "These revolutions are very annoying! There is no end to the inconvenience they cause."

"I suppose it could not be helped," answered Giovanni, gloomily.

"No. I believe I have not the reputation of wasting time in these matters. You must try and amuse yourself as best you can until the day comes. It is a pity you have not some other affair in the meanwhile, just to make the time pass pleasantly. It would keep your hand in, too. But then you have the pleasures of anticipation."

Giovanni laughed hoarsely. Spicca took a foil from the wall and played with it, looking along the thin blade, then setting the point on the carpet and bending the weapon to see whether it would spring back properly. Giovanni's eyes followed his movements, watching the slender steel, and then glancing at Spicca's long arms, his nervous fingers and peculiar grip.

"How do you manage to kill your man whenever you choose?" asked Sant' Ilario, half idly, half in curiosity.

"It is perfectly simple, at least with foils," replied the other, making passes in the air. "Now, if you will take a foil, I will promise to run you through any part of your body within three minutes. You may make a chalked mark on the precise spot. If I miss by a hair's-breadth I will let you lunge at me without guarding."

"Thank you," said Giovanni; "I do not care to be run through this morning, but I confess I would like to know

how you do it. Could not you touch the spot without thrusting home?"

"Certainly, if you do not mind a scratch on the shoulder or the arm. I will try and not draw blood. Come on—so—in guard—wait a minute! Where will you be hit? That is rather important."

Giovanni, who was in a desperate humour and cared little what he did, rather relished the idea of a bout which savoured of reality. There was a billiard-table in the adjoining room, and he fetched a piece of chalk at once.

"Here," said he, making a small white spot upon his coat on the outside of his right shoulder.

"Very well," observed Spicca. "Now, do not rush in or I may hurt you."

"Am I to thrust, too?" asked Giovanni.

"If you like. You cannot touch me if you do."

"We shall see," answered Sant' Ilario, nettled at Spicca's poor opinion of his skill. "In guard!"

They fell into position and began play. Giovanni immediately tried his special method of disarming his adversary, which he had scarcely ever known to fail. He forgot, however, that Spicca had seen him practise this piece of strategy with success upon Del Ferice. The melancholy duellist had spent weeks in studying the trick, and had completely mastered it. To Giovanni's surprise the Count's hand turned as easily as a ball in a socket, avoiding the pressure, while his point scarcely deviated from the straight line. Giovanni, angry at his failure, made a quick feint and a thrust, lunging to his full reach. Spicca parried as easily and carelessly as though the prince had been a mere beginner, and allowed the latter to recover himself before he replied. A full two seconds after Sant' Ilario had resumed his guard, Spicca's foil ran over his with a speed that defied parrying, and he felt a short sharp prick in his right shoulder. Spicca sprang back and lowered his weapon.

"I think that is the spot," he said coolly, and then came forward and examined Giovanni's coat. The point had penetrated the chalked mark in the centre, inflicting a wound not more than a quarter of an inch deep in the muscle of the shoulder.

"Observe," he continued, "that it was a simple tierce, without a feint or any trick whatever."

On realising his absolute inferiority to such a master of the art, Giovanni broke into a hearty laugh at his own discomfiture. So long as he had supposed that some sort of equality existed between them he had been angry at being outdone; but when he saw with what ease Spicca had accomplished his purpose, his admiration for the skill displayed made him forget his annoyance.

"How in the world did you do it?" he said. "I thought I could parry a simple tierce, even though I might not be a match for you!"

"Many people have thought the same, my friend. There are two or three elements in my process, one of which is my long reach. Another is the knack of thrusting very quickly, which is partly natural, and partly the result of practice. My trick consists in the way I hold my foil. Look here. I do not grasp the hilt with all my fingers as you do. The whole art of fencing lies in the use of the thumb and forefinger. I lay my forefinger straight in the direction of the blade. Of course I cannot do it with a basket or a bell hilt, but no one ever objects to common foils. It is dangerous — yes — I might hurt my finger, but then, I am too quick. You ask the advantage? It is very simple. You and I and every one are accustomed from childhood to point with the forefinger at things we see. The accuracy with which we point is much more surprising than you imagine. We instinctively aim the forefinger at the object to a hair's-breadth of exactness. I only make my point follow my forefinger. The important thing, then, is to grasp the hilt very firmly, and yet leave the wrist limber. I shoot in the same way with a revolver, and pull the trigger with my middle finger. I scarcely ever miss. You might amuse yourself by trying these things while you are waiting for Gouache. They will make the time pass pleasantly."

Spicca, whose main pleasure in life was in the use of weapons, could not conceive of any more thoroughly delightful occupation.

"I will try it," said Giovanni, rubbing his shoulder a little, for the scratch irritated him. "It is very inter-

esting. I hope that fellow will not go and have himself killed by the Garibaldians before I get a chance at him."

"You are absolutely determined to kill him, then?" Spicca's voice, which had grown animated during his exposition of his method, now sank again to its habitually melancholy tone.

Giovanni only shrugged his shoulders at the question, as though any answer were needless. He hung the foil he had used in its place on the wall, and began to smoke.

"You will not have another bout?" inquired the Count, putting away his weapon also, and taking his hat to go.

"Thanks — not to-day. We shall meet soon, I hope. I am very grateful for your good offices, Spicca. I would ask you to stay to breakfast, but I do not want my father to know of this affair. He would suspect something if he saw you here."

"Yes," returned the other quietly, "people generally do. I am rather like a public executioner in that respect. My visits often precede a catastrophe. What would you have? I am a lonely man."

"You, who have so many friends!" exclaimed Giovanni.

"Bah! It is time to be off," said Spicca, and shaking his friend's hand hastily he left the room.

Giovanni stood for several minutes after he had gone, wondering with a vague curiosity what this man's history had been, as many had wondered before. There was a fatal savour of death about Spicca which everybody felt who came near him. He was dreaded, as one of the worst-tempered men and one of the most remarkable swordsmen in Europe. He was always consulted in affairs of honour, and his intimate acquaintance with the code, his austere integrity, and his vast experience, made him invaluable in such matters. But he was not known to have any intimate friends among men or women. He neither gambled nor made love to other men's wives, nor did any of those things which too easily lead to encounters of arms; and yet, in his cold and melancholy way he was constantly quarrelling and fighting and killing his man, till it was a wonder that the police would tolerate him in any European capital. It

was rumoured that he had a strange history, and that his life had been embittered in his early youth by some tragic circumstance, but no one could say what that occurrence had been nor where it had taken place. He felt an odd sympathy for Giovanni, and his reference to his loneliness in his parting speech was unique, and set his friend to wondering about him.

Giovanni's mind was now as much at rest as was possible, under conditions which obliged him to postpone his vengeance for an indefinite period. He had passed a sleepless night after his efforts to find Gouache and had risen early in the morning to be sure of catching him. He had not seen his father since their interview of the previous evening, and had hoped not to see him again till the moment of leaving for Saracinesca. The old man had understood him, and that was all that was necessary for the present. He suspected that his father would not seek an interview any more than he did himself. But an obstacle had presented itself in the way of his departure which he had not expected, and which irritated him beyond measure. Corona was ill. He did not know whether her ailment were serious or not, but it was evident that he could not force her to leave her bed and accompany him to the country, so long as the doctor declared that she could not be moved. When Spicca was gone, he did not know what to do with himself. He would not go and see his wife, for any meeting must be most unpleasant. He had nerved himself to conduct her to the mountains, and had expected that the long drive would be passed in a disagreeable silence. So long as Corona was well and strong, he could have succeeded well enough in treating her as he believed that she deserved. Now that she was ill, he felt how impossible it would be for him to take good care of her without seeming to relent, even if he did not relent in earnest; and on the other hand his really noble nature would have prevented him from being harsh in his manner to her while she was suffering.

Until he had been convinced that a duel with Gouache was for the present impossible, his anger had supported him, and had made the time pass quickly throughout the sleepless night and through the events of the morning.

Now that he was alone, with nothing to do but to meditate upon the situation, his savage humour forsook him and the magnitude of his misfortune oppressed him and nearly drove him mad. He went over the whole train of evidence again and again, and as often as he reviewed what had occurred, his conviction grew deeper and stronger, and he acknowledged that he had been deceived as man was never deceived before. He realised the boundless faith he had given to this woman who had betrayed him; he recollected the many proofs she had given him of her love; he drew upon the store of his past happiness and tortured himself with visions of what could never be again; he called up in fancy Corona's face when he had led her to the altar and the very look in her eyes was again upon him; he remembered that day more than two years ago when, upon the highest tower of Saracinesca, he had asked her to be his wife, and he knew not whether he desired to burn the memory of that first embrace from his heart, or to dwell upon the sweet recollection of that moment and suffer the wound of to-day to rankle more hotly by the horror of the comparison. When he thought of what she had been, it seemed impossible that she could have fallen; when he saw what she had become he could not believe that she had ever been innocent. A baser man than Giovanni would have suffered more in his personal vanity, seeing that his idol had been degraded for a mere soldier of fortune — or for a clever artist — whichever Gouache called himself, and such a husband would have forgiven her more easily had she forsaken him for one of his own standing and rank. But Giovanni was far above and beyond the thought of comparing his enemy with himself. He was wounded in what he had held most sacred, which was his heart, and in what had grown to be the mainspring of his existence, his trust in the woman he loved. Those who readily believe are little troubled if one of their many little faiths be shaken; but men who believe in a few things, with the whole strength of their being, are hurt mortally when that on which they build their loyalty is shattered and overturned.

Giovanni was a just man, and was rarely carried away by appearances; least of all could he have shown any

such weakness when the yielding to it involved the destruction of all that he cared for in life. But the evidence was overwhelming, and no man could be blamed for accepting it. There was no link wanting in the chain, and the denials made by Corona and Anastase could not have influenced any man in his senses. What could a woman do but deny all? What was there for Gouache but to swear that the accusation was untrue? Would not any other man or woman have done as much? There was no denying it. The only person who remained unquestioned was Faustina Montevarchi. Either she was the innocent girl she appeared to be or not. If she were, how could Giovanni explain to her that she had been duped, and made an instrument in the hands of Gouache and Corona? She would not know what he meant. Even if she admitted that she loved Gouache, was it not clear that he had deceived her too, for the sake of making an accomplice of one who was constantly with Corona? Her love for the soldier could not explain the things that had passed between Anastase and Giovanni's wife, which Giovanni had seen with his own eyes. It could not account for the whisperings, the furtive meeting and tender words of which he had been a witness in his own house. It could not do away with the letter and the pin. But if Faustina were not innocent of assisting the two, she would deny everything, even as they had done.

As he thought of all these matters and followed the cruelly logical train of reasoning forced upon him by the facts, a great darkness descended upon Giovanni's heart, and he knew that his happiness was gone from him for ever. Henceforth nothing remained but to watch his wife jealously, and suffer his ills with the best heart he could. The very fact that he loved her still, with a passion that defied all things, added a terrible bitterness to what he had to bear, for it made him despise himself as none would have dared to despise him.

CHAPTER XII.

As Giovanni sat in solitude in his room he was not aware that his father had received a visit from no less a personage than Prince Montevarchi. The latter found Saracinesca very much preoccupied, and in no mood for conversation, and consequently did not stay very long. When he went away, however, he carried under his arm a bundle of deeds and documents which he had long desired to see and in the perusal of which he promised himself to spend a very interesting day. He had come with the avowed object of getting them, and he neither anticipated nor met with any difficulty in obtaining what he wanted. He spoke of his daughter's approaching marriage with San Giacinto, and after expressing his satisfaction at the alliance with the Saracinesca, remarked that his son-in-law had told him the story of the ancient deed, and begged permission to see it for himself. The request was natural, and Saracinesca was not suspicious at any time; at present, he was too much occupied with his own most unpleasant reflections to attach any importance to the incident. Montevarchi thought there was something wrong with his friend, but inasmuch as he had received the papers, he asked no questions and presently departed with them, hastening homewards in order to lose no time in satisfying his curiosity.

Two hours later he was still sitting in his dismal study with the manuscripts before him. He had ascertained what he wanted to know, namely, that the papers really existed and were drawn up in a legal form. He had hoped to find a rambling agreement, made out principally by the parties concerned, and copied with some improvements by the family notary of the time, for he had made up his mind that if any flaw could be discovered in the deed San Giacinto should become Prince Saracinesca, and should have possession of all the immense wealth that belonged to the family. San Giacinto was the heir in the direct line, and although his great-grandfather had relinquished his birthright in the firm expectation of having no children, the existence of his